

Sullivan County to study jail options

◆ **\$45 million estimate:** Consultants say current facility is "worn out."

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UNITY — Sullivan County legislators are considering a new \$45 million jail that would be more than six times the size of the existing facility and include a substance-abuse-treatment unit.

The county can build a new facility, renovate and expand the existing jail or merge a new building with the renovated facility, said Laura Maiello-Reidy, senior associate with Ricci Greene Associates, the New York City architecture firm that designed the Merrimack County House of Corrections. Each option would

cost about the same.

"Your facility is pretty well worn out," architect Ken Ricci told the Sullivan County delegation.

County Manager Ed Gil de Rubio said the delegation will most likely vote in September or October on whether to issue a bond, and construction on the new facility could start as early as next year.

The existing jail, located in Unity next to the county nursing

home, is 13,850 square feet and was built to house 44 inmates. On average, about 100 inmates, both male and female, are there at any given time, county officials said.

The proposed 90,638-square-foot jail would be a two-story building with holding areas suitable to various types of inmates, from maximum security to a unit designated specifically for substance abusers.

About 80 percent of inmates

at the county jail are non-violent drug abusers — many of them repeat offenders whose parents were locked in the same jail at one time, Maiello-Reidy said, citing a recent inmate survey.

County Attorney Marc Hathaway said the county's two largest communities, Newport and Claremont, are rife with illicit drug use and sales, much of it involving heroin and crack cocaine. Inmates are often held in jail while

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they wait for a free bed at a drug treatment facility, he said.

"We have a huge, huge problem and there is no mechanism for dealing with that problem in this county," Hathaway said. "That problem is addiction."

Having substance abuse treatment beds at the jail would help smooth the transition for inmates and break the revolving-door cycle that keeps them coming back, Hathaway said. It would also lighten the burden on the county's human services budget, he said.

About three years ago, Sullivan County created a "transitional housing unit" in an old

wing of the nursing home. Inmates nearing the end of their sentences who have exhibited good behavior live on the unit, but are allowed to work in the community without supervision during the day. The program has been successful and needs room to grow, Gil de Rubio said.

"It's the old carrot-and-stick philosophy, and it's helping the inmates," he said.

The county is also expanding its pre-trial services program, which allows accused criminals to check in with police and submit to random drug screenings, rather than await trial behind

bars. That program, in combination with other alternatives to incarceration, could eventually reduce the jail population, Maiello-Reidy said, but not within the next decade.

In addition to the \$45 million project cost, upgrading the county jail would require 28 new staff members at an annual cost of about \$1.1 million, as well as about \$425,000 in additional utility costs.

If the delegation decides in favor of a new jail, the old jail could become a regional training facility for law enforcement and other emergency response agencies, Gil de Rubio said.